

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: ANONYMOUS (COLOMBIA)

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL

DATE: APRIL 1, 2008

C = CHRISTOPH

A = ANONYMOUS

Tape 08.25

C: So how long have you been living and working in Lowell now?

A: Since nineteen seventy nine.

C: How did you come to Lowell and where did you come from?

A: My uncle was one of the first persons to come here to work at the textile company.

C: Was that at Wannalancit where they did the special fabrics?

A: Yes. My uncle was living in Medellin, Colombia and some of the American people went there to one of the textile companies to choose some people to come here and he was one of them. He come here and some years later he started to bring the family, his sisters and brothers, and I come here in nineteen seventy nine.

C: How old were you then, if you don't mind me asking?

A: Around nineteen years old.

C: What was your impression of the US before you came here?

A: Not good, I didn't want to come. I told my mother I would have to think about many things because at that time, that year, I finished my high school, and I had told my mother that I wanted to stay and finish school, but she kept saying no, I was the first one she wanted to take. We are

only two, my brother and me, and my mother believed that because I was a woman I should be with her, and so I had to come here. The first five years were very hard for me; I was crying and crying, no friends and different culture. I used to have a big group of friends.

C: You said you were in Medellin? It's very different than Lowell.

A: Yes. You grow up in one place, you have your neighborhood, you have the people. If you are sick the neighbors come with soup to find out how you are, it's a close neighborhood. I had my cousins and my friends who would come to my house every night to have a coffee, and sometimes there are twelve or fourteen of us together just to drink coffee. And here, I felt lonely and lost. Yes, my mother and father were here and I saw all my cousins, but everybody worked, everybody had to go to work and I had to work too. It felt very different, yes.

C: Where did you work when you came here?

A: My first job was with Merrimack Electronics. That was my first job.

C: Was that an assembly line job?

A: Yes... it was very funny because my mother and me, we got the same job in the same company at the same table and we didn't speak English, so we just concentrated on work. And American people who had been there ten, twelve years made twenty pieces a day, and my mother and me, the first week we started, we made thirty, thirty five pieces and the Americans were telling us we didn't have to work that hard. The managers were looking at us, because we were new and we were doing fifteen pieces more a day, and so they were going to pressure the other people to work harder, and the Americans were mad. We didn't understand what was happening and so we just kept working harder over there.

C: You felt there was a lot of jealousy?

A: Yes. They would lie to go to the bathroom and then stay ten, fifteen minutes over there and we went to the bathroom if we had to but went right back to work. We were afraid so we just concentrated on work.

C: So what was your next job after that?

A: The second job was over there, now it's apartments, close to the green bridge... There's another company there, but it used to be a company, but now it's apartments over there. I forgot the name of the textile company. I used to cry over there because there was so much black grease that would get on my feet from moving the machine, and I was so sad. I would say to my mother, "Why did you have to bring me here?" and it was very sad. My brother got a job at Wannalancit, that's when we came here. He was happy as soon as he came here, he had friends, he started to go out with an American girl friend. Totally different. He loved it since he came here, but it took me four, five years.

C: Was your uncle a textile worker back in Colombia? Is that why he came to Lowell because he had the special skills?

A: That is the reason he came here, yes.

C: Was your brother working as a textile worker back in Colombia too?

A: No. Everyone who come from Colombia started working at Wannalancit, especially the men. But after that company [Merrimack Electronics] I started to work in another company, USCI. They made catheters and all that stuff. Yes, medical, very different, very clean. Everything was different, I started to feel better over there, more money, and it was a much better life at that time.

C: Is that why you changed jobs, because of better pay and working conditions?

A: It's so funny because we had many Colombian people here at that time and if one got a good job, everyone would go there. They would notice somebody got a good job and a hundred people would go there and that happened.

C: Did you often go with a family member as a reference to get hired?

A: Yes. I was there for ten years. I quit because I returned to Colombia for three years. I went back in nineteen ninety one, I got married and my husband didn't like it here so he went back to Colombia and wanted me to come so I had to sell my car and everything to go over there, and I came back in ninety three.

C: Why did you decide to return to the United States?

A: Because my husband came here with a visa for tourists, but it expired. When I married him I asked for papers and everything and he said he didn't want to be illegally here and so he returned there, but when we went to the American embassy over there, he got a green card and was waiting for the paper work. He was studying to be an engineer and UMass took many, many of the credits from there and now he's doing his MA. It's totally different if you are illegal or you are a resident.

C: Today many Hispanic people get harassed because they want to make sure they have papers.

A: And I think it's so sad because my work is to try to help Hispanics to find jobs...I have to go every week to Lowell High, to the Greater Lowell Technical High School, and sometimes the kids cry, "I want to go to the university," and I feel so bad because they are here illegally. One day I was told to talk to this boy who was an excellent student, good grades, very quick in class and in two months it went downhill. I was asking him what happened and he said, "I am in twelfth grade, if I leave from here, I can't go to university, I want to stay at Lowell High. He wanted to fail, so he decided to fail himself so he could stay in school doing something instead of being outside and doing nothing. Everyone was so surprised about what happened to this boy, but he told me the truth. And I feel so sad for these kids, because some of them are so smart, very

smart, good kids, and they only want to go to university. They say it will give them an opportunity to be a better person. It's good for the society. It's good for the community, it's good for the family, it's good for everybody. If they don't make it so these kids can go to university, they're going to be outside doing things they aren't supposed to do.

C: What are the options for kids like that, who are really smart but don't get access to university?

A: I know kids who marry for papers.

C: Are you a citizen?

A: I have been a citizen since nineteen ninety four.

C: Do you still work in Lowell now?

A: Yes, I work at a Career Center.

C: Do you still live in Lowell?

A: For right now. My mother's still living in the same apartment that we used to live in. They didn't get a house. And I feel so bad for them because they didn't buy a house. My father gets eight hundred dollars and my mother gets eight hundred dollars. Since nineteen seventy nine they were working, full-time, part-time, and working and working.... And now all they have is social security and it is eight hundred dollars. They have to pay credit cards. My father pays for all of his medicines with a credit card. He has two full credit cards. Some of the people who came later never worked, but they qualify for Massachusetts health care and it's so sad because these people have only worked a couple years and see doctors for everything. My mother and my father had to pay insurance separate, a hundred sixty dollars every month, each one and two hundred a week for prescriptions. And they're not qualified because they made "too much money."

C: Are your parent's citizens now?

A: Yes, they are citizens. I made them become citizens. But it was very hard because they don't speak English. For the test, I had to be with them and it was very funny, because for the examination, the guy from immigration told me I had to translate the question to my father, and he gave the answers and passed the test. After I finished the test the immigration guy started to speak in Spanish! He had been listening to see if I gave the answers to my father while I was asking him the questions. Most of the time they speak Spanish, but not this time. The same happened with my mother, different year and everything, and the same thing happened. The guy came up to me afterwards and started speaking Spanish. But the questions are difficult it is hard to memorize the answers for someone who is older.

C: The test is hard and the truth is most Americans couldn't answer the questions.

A: Yes, and two weeks ago my daughter's teacher, she was studying some questions for history, and my daughter showed her my husband's citizen test and she wanted to keep it for questions for the students. But many of the questions Americans cannot answer.

C: Has the Colombian community stayed the same since you've lived in Lowell or declined?

A: It has grown.

C: And what do most people do now?

A: The Colombian people who come now are the educated people. Before the people came for better opportunities, it was totally different. Now in Colombia life is much better. It's not like five or six years ago. But now many educated people come, engineers, all kinds of educated people and most of them speak English, and they want to do an MA, they want to study, they want to do many things, but it's not like before. There are still people who come to work. But not like before.

C: Do you shop at any special stores here or eat in special restaurants?

A: At that time, we didn't have anything from Colombia, there was only one guy who used to go to New York and bring stuff from there to sell to the people here, but for example, if something is twenty dollars, he would sell it for fifty or sixty dollars and we'd pay whatever he'd say. He used to bring hot chocolate and things to make tortillas and those sorts of things. Now everywhere we go we can get what we need. And another thing, when we call to Colombia, it used to be one dollar for one minute, now we can get phone cards that are three hours for five dollars.

C: Do you still talk a lot with family in Colombia?

A: Most of my family is here, but my husband's family is there, so I still call there, yes.

C: Are you able to go visit every now and then?

A: We go every two, two and a half years because my husband's family is there and my husband wants my daughter to be with his grandmother and know the cousins and the aunts, and maybe be together for two or three weeks.

C: Do you also have family from Colombia come to visit you in the United States?

A: Every once and a while, but not many times, no.

C: So how did you end up going to university?

A: There used to be a Cuban lady working here in a special program to help international students with English grammar and writing. After that, they could take one or two classes from the university. Dukakis, the governor at that time, passed this program and we didn't have to pay.

After that you had to pay if you wanted to come to the university. I had ninety credits. I was sad I didn't finish. My husband is doing his MA and he says pay with the credit card and later we can pay, but I'm so afraid to do that because what happens if he gets laid off or something. But I used to work for Gear Up? At the university for two years and I was studying and working at the same time and I got a lot of credits at that time. They paid the tuition.

C: I want to talk a little bit about language. Do you speak Spanish with your husband?

A: Yes.

C: What about your daughter?

A: She has to speak Spanish in my house.

C: And why do you do that?

A: Because I want her to speak both languages, when she goes to Colombia, she will understand her grandmother and her cousins. I have many relatives whose kids don't speak Spanish and the kids are always asking what is being said when everyone is talking Spanish.

C: And you observed this in your family?

A: My nephews and my brother is Colombian, but his wife is American. And my nephews, they don't speak Spanish. And many of my cousins have married Americans and their kids don't speak Spanish.

C: Do you want her to know Spanish for identity reasons as well?

A: Yes, I think that's very important. And I teach Colombian dance in the club and she's in my group. I know she is a terrible dancer, but she is there. I talk to the parents and they think I am professional, but I am not professional, I teach what's in here. Since I was little I used to be in dance groups over there in Colombia. The groups here they don't dance that well, but if we want to be able to transmit our roots to our kids, good for us. If they dance the cumbia, they will know it's from the north of Colombia because I explain it a little bit.

C: So you teach dance but also culture and history?

A: Only a little bit. I tell them from what part of Colombia the dance is from and what it represents. I teach my class in Spanish.

C: Do you hope that your daughter, if she has kids, will teach them Spanish?

A: Well, yes.

C: Do you consider yourself Colombian, American, Colombian-American?

A: When I came to this country it was very hard for me, but at this moment, I've been married for nineteen years and I live in Lowell.... My heart is half and half, because at city hall when they are going to do something, a parade, they call me to take care of the Colombian part. I feel so proud. Every year I am doing the Colombian Independence Day at city hall. I brought people to sing with guitars and people to dance and I'm so happy to be able to do things for Colombia, but I love Lowell too, I love this country. I love my country, if I had to go and live there, I would go, but if I don't have to go there, I will stay here.

C: Do you have to support any Colombian relatives back home?

A: No, because my parents are here. The only thing I am doing is very simple. I have friends who teach in poor schools and I make parties to collect money and we send the money to pay for lunch for kids. Every year I'm doing something for that school, some people give me pens and pencils and notebooks, and we send them all to the school and they send me pictures and I am so happy to see that.

C: Obviously you play a major role in the Colombian community. Is there a club or something?

A: We don't have anything. We used to have a club but my community has a lot of conflicts... I separated from the group and they don't have it any more.

C: Do you feel comfortable talking about what the conflict was about?

A: The conflict was about everybody thinking they were better at doing this or that when people wanted to help.

C: So it was more about personal egos.

A: Yes, it was that.

C: I think a lot of communities are like that.

A: Yes, it's very hard to work together when someone wants to be better....But I still do things for my country, and try to represent the country as best I can.

C: Do you have any kind of informal network where you meet at people's houses or something like that?

A: When we came we used to go to houses all the time. People would invite two or three families and everyone would show up.

C: Did people bring food and drink with them?

A: Uh-huh.

C: So you had to be prepared when people were coming!

A: Yes. Now it's a more socialized life, they have discotheques, they have restaurants, they can go to different places.

C: Are there Colombian restaurants in Lowell?

A: Yes, two. One on Bridge Street, Delicias, and one they opened last Saturday on High street, close to Andover street and Shedd park. There used to be another one but they closed two weeks ago.

C: Is religion important for you and the Colombian community?

A: Yes. When you need to send any information to the Colombian community, send the flyers to the church.

C: Any particular church?

A: Most of them are at St. Patrick's church.

C: I heard that in Latin America Protestant churches are becoming more popular, is that true with the Colombians here?

A: Here there are starting to be some divisions, but I would say seventy, eighty percent are still Catholic.

C: You said you vacation in Colombia do you go anywhere else also?

A: You know I said to my husband with the money we spend going to Colombia we could have a wonderful vacation in another part, because you have to buy presents for everybody, and tickets, and you still have to pay your house, the credit card, everything before you leave, and take money over there.

C: I'd like to talk a little bit about power and politics now in Lowell. Are you a registered voter?

A: Yes.

C: There is very little immigrant representation here. What do you think about that, and who do you think holds the power here in Lowell?

A: I don't know why people don't want to be part of the political process here. I don't want to be in that. I like to vote, but I don't want to be in that, and I know Colombian people say why don't you try to be there, we'll help you, but...I know there are citizens who don't vote because they don't know about the people, because they don't speak English. I say to my parents and my brother, "I'll take you, I'm going to vote." My parents will vote for whoever my brothers votes. There's one city councilor here in Lowell that the Latinos love, Rita Mercier. We love Rita Mercier. She always tries to help our community. My parents only vote for her even though they

can vote for other people too. And they don't speak English beyond, "Hello, how are you?" When we have the Colombian Independence Day, she's there every time, and when the Colombians see that, they vote for her.

C: Do you find that other city councilors are doing the same thing?

A: The last mayor was there and the mayor's assistant was there.

C: Would you like to see more Hispanics on the city council?

A: Yes, I would like to see somebody from any Latino community, but I don't know if that will happen.

C: Have you personally experienced discrimination in your life as an immigrant here in the city?

A: Sometimes you feel that, but I used to work for Gear Up at UMass and this one American guy is still there who always expressed bad sentiments toward foreign people and made us feel very bad. At that time we used to be parent liaisons in different communities and they used to have one Cambodian, one Brazilian, one African, one American and me, the Latina. And we had to do one community and it was wonderful at that time because we were doing many programs for each community. We had English class, we had computers, I used to bring psychologists because most people had problems with their kids at Lowell High and it was a very good program, but he made us feel very bad. All five of us got laid off at the same time and later they said they needed someone to do the same job we were doing, but only one person. I applied because I knew the job, and everything they wanted I had, but I didn't finish my degree. They asked for about ten different things which I had and my boss tried to get me to come back. I applied and they interviewed me for only about five minutes, so I thought maybe because they know me. And they interviewed another girl for almost one hour, and she got the job. And she's the daughter of someone who works at UMass. And my boss told me she didn't know two languages and the first time she went to work, she had just graduated that year and didn't have experience with kids from Lowell High or with Gear Up. That year I felt very bad.

C: Do you also notice that people look at you differently in the past couple of years because of all that's been going on with "illegals"?

A: Yes, they look at all of us like we are illegals and ask people if they have papers and when that happens I ignore them, because I can get very mad when that happens. I hate it when people say, "Speak English, this is America." If I have not seen someone who is Latino for a long time, we're not going to speak English, we are going to speak our language, and I love to see someone speak another language... I enjoy the sound. I don't get mad like some Americans.

C: I would like to talk a little bit about the Lowell National Historical Park since that's who we're doing the study for. Have you gone to any of the museums or anything downtown?

A: Oh yes.

C: Does the Colombian community do anything at the Folk Festival for example? Or have you been active with the Park?

A: I practice my dance over there in the Mogan Center and the big picture that was over there where you come in is my uncle and my cousins.

C: Do you feel like a lot of the Colombians go to the Park or use the Park?

A: They don't know about the museums. My husband loves the museum, he takes me and my daughter and anyone who comes to visit us from Colombia to look at it. And what is really funny is that one of my uncles wife, she's around seventy years old, and she's come to visit us and my husband took her to the textile museum over there and as soon as she saw the machines, the tears were coming. I remembered she used to work in a place like that in Colombia. My aunt started to explain to us what the machines did... and my aunt's tears were coming and she was so excited and she explained it to us.

C: What could the Park do to get...

A: Information in Spanish. Tours in Spanish. I talked to Mehmed Ali and told him, he's the person that let me use the room for dance, I told him that if they had people who did the tours in Spanish they would have more people. I know in Boston they have one Latino company. When people come from Colombia, I make reservations to do the tour of Boston in Spanish. I've been like ten times and I can be the guide now! Plus I learned a lot of stuff about Harvard and MIT because they gave the stuff about everything in Boston in Spanish. It would be nice to have someone do this tour in Spanish and in different languages.

C: Well thank-you so much for your time.